

News focus

Researchers protest at GM crop debate

A group of scientists has written to the British prime minister to complain about the government's handling of the assessment and public debate about the potential introduction of genetically modified crops into the country. **Nigel Williams** reports.

More than 100 scientists signed a letter to the British prime minister, Tony Blair, last month complaining about the way the debate on GM crops was handled.

The topic has been hitting the headlines in the UK and Europe as researchers, protesters, industry and governments have been battling to find a way forward. But many researchers now believe that their corner has been unfairly treated. Public meetings had been hijacked by anti-GM groups and 'misleading' reports in the press

had not been corrected, they complained. The same method of public consultation could put other technologies at risk of 'prejudice and procrastination'.

The letter was triggered by the outcome of an elaborate exercise in consultation which seemed – in the eyes of some scientists – simply to widen the gap between researchers and protesters.

This was followed by a report of several farm scale evaluations set up in 1999 which suggested that genetically modified rape and beet

had turned out to be 'worse' for wildlife than conventional varieties. What many researchers point out is that the trials were more a test of different pesticide regimes between conventional and GM varieties rather than a direct assessment of GM technology. But this verdict was greeted with delight by the GM protesters, although the government's own expert advisory committee has yet to report on the evidence.

Plant scientist Derek Burke, one of the signatories, told Radio 4's Today programme: "We want arguments based on evidence and what we are getting is arguments based on opinion. We are saying to Tony Blair loud and clear that



Trail travails: Many researchers believe the British government has failed in its approach to the assessment of introduction of GM crops. A trial of genetically modified maize, with one field shown here, was the only crop to show that the changed pesticide regime might be of benefit to the other field flora and fauna over conventional crops. (Photo: Science Photo Library.)

the science community is disaffected."

Christopher Leaver, professor of plant sciences at Oxford University, and another of the signatories, said that this disaffection could cost the country dearly. Monsanto is one of the most recent companies to close down plant science operations in the UK.

The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said advice from the government's Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment would inform any decision on whether GM crops should be grown commercially in Britain and this committee had not yet assessed the evidence from the farm scale evaluations.

"We recognize that the biotechnology industry is a vital part of the country's economy. However, our approach to GM is based on the precautionary principle. Each GM crop application is considered on a case-by-case basis."

The government's chief scientific adviser, David King, has written an article in response to the letter highlighting that the government is neither pro nor anti-GM. "The government has always recognized that GM crops raise important and difficult issues... Decisions will be based only on sound scientific evidence. That is why a robust and independent scientific process to gather evidence has been put in place," he says. "The farm scale evaluations – the biggest crop trial of their kind in the world – are part of that process," he says.

"It is right and proper that government should 'remain silent' on the most recent stage of the GM debate – the publishing of the FSE results," he says, until the government gets an analysis of the data by the advisory committee. "I am sure scientists will empathise with the need to get all the data and analysis before arriving at a conclusion," he says.

He also countered the letter's statement that scientists are leaving the country. "While it is true some scientists are leaving, others are arriving. Science is a global market... I started my career in South Africa and so can be regarded as an example of 'brain gain' rather than 'brain drain' and there are many others like me."

In spite of King's response, the signatories are still hoping for a reply from Blair. He has, on several occasions, championed the importance of the biotechnology sector and the government's science budget has seen substantial growth over the past few years.

But deep concerns remain. A group of researchers set up the organisation Sense About Science last year which coordinated the letter. The group felt that evidence was now being ignored from issues as diverse as the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine to the use of animals in research.

Dear Prime Minister

The results of the Farm Scale Evaluations of three GM crops announced on October 16 were reported across the media as 'the end of GM in the UK'. In fact the FSEs did not assess the effects of genetically modifying the crops, but rather the impact of different types of weed control. They had little to do with genetic modification, the processes or potential.

However, the government's reaction to the latest misleading reports on GM was to remain silent. Since 1999, the government has sponsored several protracted deliberations on GM but has consistently neglected opportunities to address any of the unsubstantiated assertions about the process of genetic modification and possible risks.

We feel you should be aware of the consequences of this ongoing failure to respond and to give a lead:

1 Demoralisation

Some scientists are leaving the UK, but many more are thoroughly demoralized by hostility to the work they do, which is continually misrepresented and even sabotaged. This is despite the new scientific opportunities afforded by developments like genomics. Those who have contributed many hours to public communication and government-sponsored deliberations feel undermined by the government's failure to contradict false claims about 'Frankenfoods', health risks and 'superweeds'.

2 Declining contribution to scientific development

Work on the basic science of genetic engineering and its application to plants is being scaled down. This will inhibit our ability to contribute to scientific knowledge internationally, and to meet challenges like yield improvement, drought tolerance and reduced reliance on pesticides. The government's many initiatives in this prolonged deliberation on GM crops have been structured in a way that makes it impossible to clarify the nature of the scientific work or its opportunities. Genetic engineering of plants has been reduced to a matter of consumer preference; the public has been misinformed; and the efforts of scientists to communicate about genetic engineering have been misused.

For those of us who spent our lives 'doing research, publishing research and teaching research' in the UK, it is distressing to experience such a backward slide; for others of us, and our students just starting out, it is deeply discouraging. More importantly, for society as a whole, if the same framework is applied in future decision-making, we risk seeing other technologies lose out to prejudice and procrastination.

Yours sincerely

Signed by Professor Derek C Burke, professor and vice chancellor of the University of East Anglia (1987–1995), chairman ACNFP (1987–1997); and 113 other individual scientists.

Protest: A copy of the letter sent to Tony Blair by a group of scientists frustrated at the handling of GM issues by his government. The first farm scale evaluations of three crops have received widespread media attention.